

## Eric Shen: Finding Your Career and Yourself

### MEMBER PROFILE



*Eric Shen (Director, Southern California Gateway Office, Maritime Administration of the United States Department of Transportation), Photos © John Livzey, 2015*

Eric Shen has a very long title and great responsibility with the United States Department of Transportation. The nontraditional path he took to reach it offers a model for engineers and planners looking to build a career in transportation.

Shen serves as Director, Southern California Gateway Office, Maritime Administration (MARAD) of the United States Department of Transportation. Based in Long Beach, his area of responsibility encompasses Arizona and Southern California. He works closely with four deep-water ports, namely Hueneme, Long Beach, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

### **Dreams of Flying Fast**

“I’m responsible for connecting federal programs with ports and promoting maritime commerce,” Shen says. Quite an accomplishment for someone growing up in landlocked Taipei City and dreaming of becoming a fighter jet pilot, a dream ended by his poor eyesight.

“As a young boy, I knew I wasn’t afraid of trying but didn’t know what I would become,” says Shen. “I was a nontraditional college student—I didn’t start my 4-year college right after high school. I had to fulfill two years of mandatory military service at 17 before coming to the U.S. Not only I grew up fast, I also had an opportunity to figure out my capability.” After arriving in Los Angeles in 1987, Shen worked full-time as an office clerk while studying at Pasadena City College in early mornings, late evenings, and on Saturdays. In fall 1990, he transferred to UC Irvine School of Engineering as a junior.

### **Engineering Fit Methodical Nature**

“Engineering fits my personality,” he recalls. “I am very methodical. Engineering opened a door for me to understand what my interests are.” Shortly after Shen began studying at UC Irvine, one of his professors

hired him as a research assistant to support other PhD candidates. It was very logical for Shen to continue studying in the Master's program in transportation engineering.

Once he started his graduate work, another passion came calling: planning.

### **Social Ecology Changes His Course**

“By accident, I took a social ecology class at UCI,” Shen remembers. “My friends told me it was easy plus I needed the credits. The class turned out anything but easy; it really challenged my thought process.” So while Shen graduated with honors and a bachelor's degree in civil engineering, his fascination with planning and the social sciences had begun.



“That was the turning point in my studies. The turning point in my professional world came later. I took just enough classes to earn a Master's and decided not to pursue a doctoral degree in engineering. I spent most of my time in planning and non-engineering classes.

“I had a very supportive advisor,” Shen explains. “He helped me understand that many transportation professionals are capable of doing planning and engineering. Planners and engineers are essentially the same—they just look at things from two different views. I realized that you cannot be a good engineer if you cannot plan.”

Shen, an adjunct faculty in the University of Southern California Viterbi School of Engineering since 2008, asks his students a question based on his experience.

### **Are You Engi-planner or Plan-gineer?**

“What are you: an engi-planner or a plan-gineer? It really doesn't matter. You need the ability to do both.” Representing his passion for planning, Shen also teaches in USC's Sol Price School of Public Policy.

“To have a fulfilling career in transportation, we need to be creative, be methodical, and be empathetic,” he explains. “Engineering students learn many tools to solve problems. Planning students, on the other hand, learn to examine broader issues including social equality, politics, and community acceptance. Planners frame issues for engineers to resolve.” Shen emphasizes that planners and engineers are at their best when they count on each other's strength. “And often, there is no single solution to meet everyone's desires for mobility. Many perceived transportation issues, in neighborhoods for example, require no engineering solutions but lots of listening. Thus, planners and engineers either work as a team and succeed, or fail together,” Shen says.

### **Career Arc in Seven-Year Segments**

Shen, who has served as a Director at Large for the WTS-LA chapter since 2008, describes how his 22-year career evolved in seven-year segments. The first seven years were devoted to engineering. He began in hydrology design in a private firm, then joined LADOT and developed an in-depth knowledge in traffic signals. A few years later he returned to private industry and focused on real-time traffic management and system integration.

The first bend in his career arc came in Pasadena with a position he wanted but did not get in 2000. He applied for Pasadena's city traffic engineer. After interviewing Shen, however, the city created a different position for him: transportation planning and development manager.

## **Career Turning Point in Pasadena**

“I was very disappointed because I thought, ‘I am a licensed engineer, not a planner,’” Shen recalls. He views the seven years in Pasadena as a career highlight and turning point. He led a highly motivated team and completed the Bicycle Master Plan (2001), the General Plan Mobility Element (2004), and the Pedestrian Plan (2006). Coinciding with the Metro Gold Line opening in 2003, Shen worked closely with multiple departments and agencies to capitalize on new opportunities through transit-oriented development.

By mid-2007, Shen was ready to try new challenges. “I am always motivated to tackle new challenges; I have no fear of failure.” Combining hands-on experience in planning, operations, funding and extensive community outreach, Shen pursued the position of Director of Transportation for the Port of Long Beach.

“I had no maritime experience and kept asking myself ‘Why would they hire me?’” He had, however, accumulated a deep understanding of landside transportation with a reputation as an innovative and collaborative leader in transportation.

“When I pursued the opportunity, I pursued it completely,” he explains. “I reassured them that I was not a rookie. I could help the Port to develop freight infrastructure that benefits the entire region.”

## **The Port of Long Beach Bends the Arc**

In late 2007, the Port of Long Beach Board of Harbor Commissioners appointed Shen to lead the newly created Transportation Planning Division. He began the third seven-year increment of his career, another bend in the arc.

Shen oversaw the planning, design, and development of present and future transportation strategies. He built another highly motivated team. The port stated he was instrumental in securing full funding for the billion-dollar Gerald Desmond Bridge Replacement Project and led the securing of more than \$40 million in state and federal grants to complete the \$84-million Green Port Gateway Rail Improvements Project.

## **Seeing Sea Ports on National Level**

“Fast forward another seven years,” he explains. “I didn’t get bored but this (federal) opportunity became available. There are over 300 seaports in the nation; they are all different. I decided to join the federal government and see the picture on a national level.

“I didn’t skip any steps,” he emphasizes about his career path. “I began on the street working with people. Then I got to manage a city. Then I helped develop infrastructure for the second largest seaport in the nation.” Shen also attributes his success to having mentors and working with devoted colleagues.

## **Many Disciplines, All Interrelated**

“I always remind my students that there are many disciplines in transportation, but when we step back, they are all related,” he stresses. “Transportation is more than just a job; we deliver mobility options and bring people closer to each other. A nation cannot prosper without a good transportation system.”

Besides teaching, he volunteers with WTS-LA and the California Education Foundation, and serves as a Assistant Scoutmaster. Shen was recently appointed by the Transportation Research Board of the National Academies of Sciences as the Marine Group Chair. He is also known for his passion in photography.

What advice does he give to his students about their career paths?

## **No Single Path Defines Us**

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“There is no single career path that defines who we are,” he explains. “Don’t blindly follow others and let the system decide our careers. Be adventurous, challenge ourselves, and leave our own trails. Knowing that we won’t succeed each and every time, we can always pick ourselves up when we fail and then regroup.” He admits, “I do think every turning point in my career had a high chance of not working out, but I didn’t let that stop me from trying.

“My advice to a young transportation professional is that they must find their passion, whether is in transit, aviation, maritime, or non-auto travel,” Shen emphasizes. “Follow their hearts, but also be prepared that their interests will change. If you asked me 22 years ago if I would be in maritime and intermodal freight, I would have said that you were crazy—I don’t know what they are and have no formal training.”